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Munda and Political Transformation from Below: Local Politics and Power Relations in Barind, Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper argues that equality in the right to vote in electoral politics alone cannot ensure the actual empowerment of the minority, although this is a necessary step in the process. Legal and institutional frameworks for empowerment are also necessary for minority groups, like the Munda, to gain ground in the assertion of their rights and equitable access to government resources. The democratisation that began in 1991 after the long year of military rule provided universal suffrage. However, this benefited only a fraction of 'elites' among the Munda, while others remained marginal to the political process and were exploited as a mere 'vote bank' by the powerful Muslim leaders and Munda 'elites.' Since 2007, there have been several initiatives by the government to establish institutional frameworks for minority and poor people to demand their share of state benefits based on the principle of equity. This paper describes how these institutions have shaped local politics and the everyday lives of Munda in the villages. There is emerging a new 'public culture' focused on creating a desirable political community, based on the concepts of 'right,' 'equality' and 'fairness' at the local level.

1. Introduction

Growth in the agrarian sector following the introduction of deep tube wells (DTWs) in the 1990s and, at the same time, government programs targeting the poor led to changes in the local politics of rural Barind in Bangladesh. With the end of the military regime in 1991, an 'all people participation' electoral democracy emerged, and the votes of minorities became vital for political parties. Munda participation in the electoral process and the fact that the previously-dominant Muslim political and factional leaders now depended upon the vote of the Adibashi to be elected onto village councils, led to a phenomenal transformation in the confidence of the Munda people in Barind.

However, as a minority and marginalised ethnic group, the Munda were still not able to compete with the Muslim majority who gained the lion's share of state resources. A lack of political connections, or an established network with local government officials, and dependence on patrons caused the Munda to have less political exposure, and thus little say in party politics or the allocation of government resources in regional areas. With the subsequent changes in politics in 1996 and

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2001, the Munda became more mobile and less dependent on landowner patrons, although they remained dependant on factional leaders. In 2007, a significant change occurred in Bangladeshi politics; the state attempted to give minority groups preferential access to natural resources. With priority access to the distribution of resources and their new relationship with and connection to political leaders, party politics and government and NGO officials outside of their villages, the Munda had new opportunities to advance their interests and improve their socio-political position.

The aim of this paper is to explore the nature of the local Munda power structure and to analyse the changing political atmosphere in which the Munda live. I will discuss on the contemporary local political culture, transformation of political relationships, and daily lives of the Munda people in the Barind region of Bangladesh. Here, I will focus on attempts by the Munda to overcome political hierarchies and dominance by the Muslim majority and to obtain 'equal' rights and their 'due' share. My discussion of this paper is based upon thirteen months of fieldwork in three villages of Khaspara, Mahapara and Mallickpur of Niamatpur Upazila in Naogaon District, from August 2008 to September 2009.

In this paper I argue that, as the Munda became less dependent on landowner patrons, the importance of land as the main factor of agrarian production and, therefore, as an index of the rural power structure is in declined trend. The Munda are now more mobile and became less dependent on landowner patrons. The growth of agricultural work in and outside of villages has brought the opportunity for the Munda to lessen their dependency on powerful patrons. Educated Munda are making political connections beyond village communities. Land-based patron-client relationships, thus, are less important in the Munda's struggle to gain access to national political support.

As they adapted to this new political culture, the Munda began running for local political offices. Today the Munda are raising their collective voice against the corruption, embezzlement and bribery that had plagued state development programs and the distribution of state resources, something that would have been inconceivable for the Munda as little as 10-15 years ago. They are now questioning certain developmental issues and drawing attention to errors in the government's implementation of state plans. As more and more Munda are having access to state resources, they are becoming increasingly aware and interested in state politics. They are constantly redefining what politics should be in a democratic Bangladesh. Perhaps most noticeably, a new public image of a desirable socio-political community is emerging that applies the language of 'right,' 'equality' and 'fairness.'

This paper is divided into six sections. After a brief introduction in section one, section two presents the location of the study area and the administrative system. Section three discusses the

political culture of Bangladesh between 1971 and 1990. Section four describes and analyses the democratisation process and the limitations it posed for the Munda people during the period 1991 to 2006. Section five focuses on the transformation of national politics and its relationship to local political culture from 2007 to 2010. Finally, section six analyses my observations for understanding the recent political transformations and contemporary politics surrounding the Munda people in Barind.

2. The Area under Study

2.1 Location of the Field

The Barind region is part of the Pabna district, alongside the greater Rajshahi, Rangpur, Dinajpur and Bagura districts. Its area is about 7,700 square kilometres. This study deals with three villages of the Rasulpur Union of Niamatpur Upazila in the Naogaon district of Barind region (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). Of the three, the two villages Khaspara and Mahapara are inhabited mainly by the Munda,

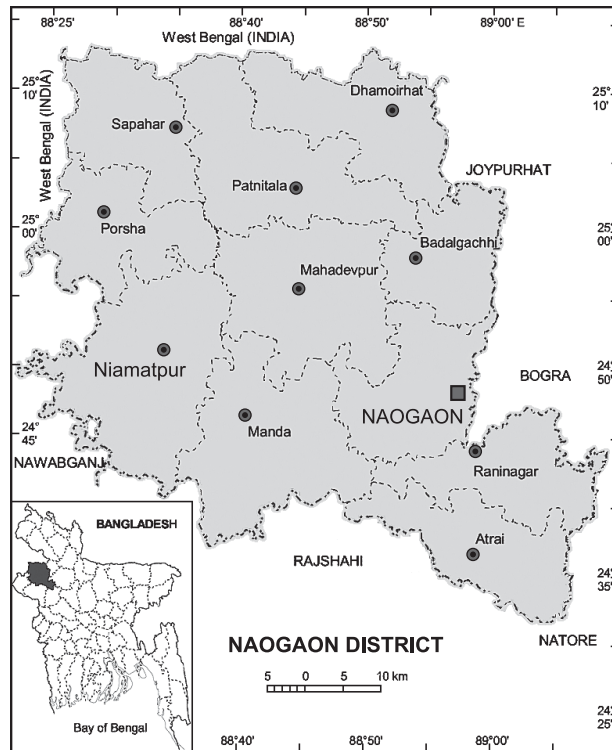


Fig. 1. Niamatpur Upazila in Naogaon

Source: [Islam 2003]

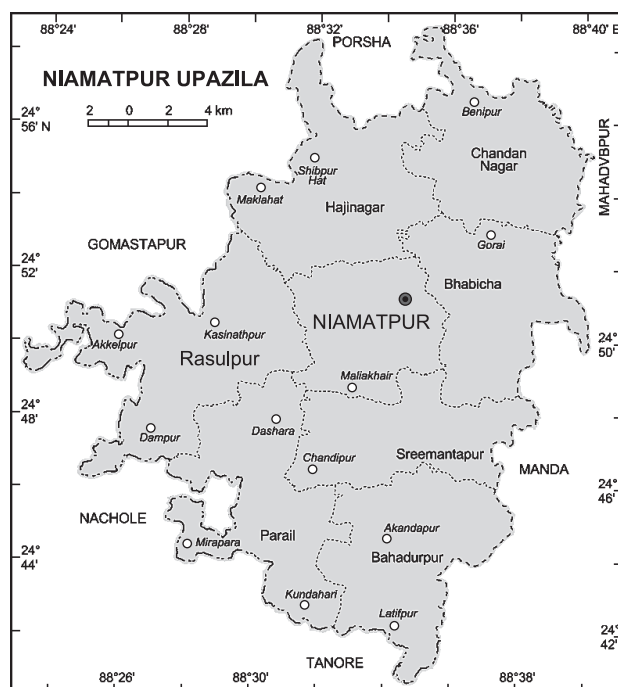


Fig. 2. Rasulpur Union in Niamatpur Upazila

Source: [Islam 2003]

and Mallickpur is inhabited exclusively by Muslims. These three villages of Rasulpur union, which lie about 50 Kilometres North-West of Naogaon, are connected to the town by one hourly bus service. From the Divisional town Rajshahi, its distance is about 60 kilometres.

2.2 Composition of Village Population

In Khaspara and Mahapara, the Munda are surrounded by Muslims who constitute the majority in this region. In 2009, the population of the three villages was 701, of which 429 were Munda and 241 were Muslims (see Table 1)

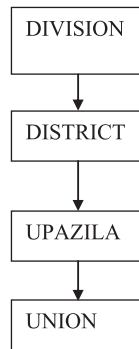
2.3 The Administrative System

The District has been the most powerful level of administration, with the Union Parishads serving as the important representative bodies at the local level (see Fig. 3). Between the District and the Union is the Upazila, which is the lowest level of government administration and an important administrative unit for service delivery. Union is the lowest political unit, and there are around nine unions under each Upazila. Each union usually contains nine wards, each of which elects a representative to the Union Parishad, the lowest tier of local government. In addition, every three wards elect one female member, so every Union Parishad has at least three female representatives. In turn, there are

Table 1. The Community Wise Population, 2008-2009

Community	Khaspara		Mahapara		Mallickpur	
	No of Households	No of Populations	No of Households	No of Populations	No of Households	No of Populations
Munda	80	249	47	180	0	0
Muslim	11	36	9	30	50	175
Rabidash	0	0	4	19	0	0
Santal	0	0	3	12	0	0
Total	91	285	63	241	50	175

Source: Fieldwork, Niamatpur 2008-2009.

**Fig. 3. Administrative Structure of Bangladesh**

Source: Prepared by author.

roughly two villages in each ward. Villages tend to be geographical and social units without any particular administrative function.

Rasulpur is under the Niamatpur police station. Niamatpur is the nearest town, and there are frequent van and bus services each day to Niamatpur and daily bus services to Naogaon (about 30 kilometres northeast) and Rajshahi (30 kilometres northwest), two main district towns of the divisional city of Rajshahi.

3. Political Culture of Bangladesh: 1971-1990

Following the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, a ‘military’ government prevailed from 1975 and 1990. The political culture of 1970s and 1980s can be characterised as anti-poor and, in all aspects, rooted in patron clientism [e.g. Arens and Beurden 1977; Thorp 1978; BRAC 1980; Hartmann and Boyce 1983; Bode 2002]. This greatly limited the Munda capacity to contest and participate in politics.

Government programs implemented during the 1970s and 1980s failed to redistribute state

resources at the grass root level. The aim of the military regime was to use the local government system to legitimise itself in the eyes of the people; for this, they acted as patrons and distributed developmental funds through the Union Parishad chairman, by-passing the powerful, district-level administration. The military government managed to build up a base of support in the rural areas among the Union Parishad leaders [Westergaard 1985: 52]. In this, the military government wanted to establish a direct link to rural areas and to build up a group of loyal supporters at the Upazila level. This group was more powerful than the Union Parishad chairmen at the lower level. Thus, decisions regarding resources remained, under the control of the elite or political factions that controlled the Upazilas [McCarthy 1993: 108].

In Barind, state economic benefits reached only those people who had established connections with government officials or village leaders. As the Muslim majority dominated these proceedings, political opportunities for the Munda to access state resources or to participate in local village politics in a meaningful way in Barind were limited.

4. Transformation of Local Political Culture: Democratisation and Its Limitations (1991-2006)

Significant changes occurred in the political sphere after 1991. Agriculture growth followed the development of DTW technology, an advancement that resulted in increased opportunities for agricultural work outside the village and lessened the Munda's dependency on Muslims. As patrons, the Muslims had not only hired the Munda for farm work but had also interceded on their behalf during court cases and facilitated their contact with police and local government. From the late 1990s, however, these functions were no longer exclusive to powerful local Muslims; people of lower social class, including the Munda, had gained actual access to state resources and the power to negotiate for political participation. In this section, I look at the changing circumstances of Bangladeshi political culture from 1991-2006, and how these changes affected the Munda's day-to-day struggle for representation in local government.

4.1 Declining Trend of Culture of Patron-Clientelism and the Mundas' Relation with Local Politics (1991-1995)

In 1991, after fifteen years of a 'military' backed government regime, a significant change occurred in the political culture of Bangladesh when a new democratic government came into power through the people's direct vote. The focus of this elected government was the promotion of institutional democracy on the grass-roots level and to directly implement developmental programs specifically targeting the poor.

The newly-elected government promoted a view of democracy that emphasised equal political participation of the poor and allowing these sections of the population to share in the process of distributing state resources. The development plan was focused on the alleviation of poverty in order to make a more diversified economy and to decentralise local government. In their attempt to alleviate poverty, the government distributed state resources directly to rural populations. These programs included the 'food for work program' for poor families, 'aid for widows' program (*bidhabā bhātā*), and 'aid for the elderly' program (*bayaska bhātā*). Government resources reached villages through political channels, i.e., from the Divisional to the Union level (Fig. 3). These resource distributions were handled by the Union Parishad chairman as the representational authority of the local government.¹⁾ The various programs and projects funded by the government resulted in new political structures and, inevitably, new positions of leadership. Because of their access to the local government and the state government's funds, these (often factional) leaders became powerful authorities in the regions of their supervision.

In my study area, Niamatpur, there are two factional groups backed by two different Bangladeshi national political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). These factions take the form of *dalas* at the village level. A *dala* is primarily a political clique with several, stabilising oligarchic leaders (*nētā*). In rural Bangladesh, these factions typically arise as affluent landlords contest each other in their struggle to acquire more wealth and social and political influence. In this process, opposing factions emerge, attracting supporters and detractors in the community. During the period 1990-2006, the most important groups in the implementation of various developmental programs were these local political leaders (affiliated with party politics) and the factional leaders (wealthy village level leaders with political connection) [Jahangir 1982; Rahman 1981]. Through the committees set up for the distribution of state resources, these factional leaders were responsible for the selection of beneficiaries, allocation of cards, and delivery and disbursal of grain.²⁾ Therefore, there was ample opportunity for corruption by this group.

From 1991 onward, the redistribution of state resources was by-and-large maintained by the

1) The chairman and members of the Union Parishad are elected by the people via direct voting. These members work for the people without receiving any financial remuneration from the government. The leaders of the Union Parishad, its chairman and the members, provide leadership to their respective villages by settling disputes, arranging funds for local projects and maintaining links between the villagers and local government officials [Mian 2003].

2) For distribution of resources, a committee was set up which, in addition to the Union Parishad chairman, includes representative members. Among other members, one member was nominated by the chairman from among the residents of the village. The factional leaders usually got the nomination, who usually came from the landowners Muslim group.

factional members of state political parties. The members of the faction whose supporting party is in power at the national level can expect to have priority in the allocations of these benefits, such as the distribution of subsidised seeds, fertilisers and rations of rice/wheat, government jobs, political offices, official contracts and access to educational institutions to name only a few.

The factional leaders in Niamatpur were members of the Muslim majority. During the election period, they played a significant role in collecting votes for their party's candidate. In return, they were rewarded with a greater share of state resources, creating an unequal power structure at the local level and, subsequently, the marginalisation or even exclusion of the poor from state resources. Because they could have direct contact with their factional leaders, the Muslims were in advantageous position in terms of allocated resources.

The Munda were dependent upon these local factional leaders for several reasons. The leaders of the village factions played pivotal roles in forming connections with higher political leaders, local administrative offices, the police and courts; these connections were vital in gaining governmental resources and administrative favour. The Munda depended on the Muslim factional leaders to protect them from political and police harassment. If the Munda went through the right political channels, they could also expect better treatment, or at least avoid harassment from bureaucratic offices and the police. Faction leaders were typically wealthy, comparatively well-educated and thus were literate and well-spoken. They used these abilities, together with their familial and social connections to high-ranking officials and political offices, in order to help faction members with various administrative processes. It is noteworthy that the Munda, as a very small Adibashi group, were not getting any remarkable allocations of funds or resources from the Bangladeshi government; the Munda relied on factional leaders to assist them in applying for various government benefits and loans, the registration of land purchases and sales, defending themselves in police and court cases, and, among other things, applying for entrance into institutions of higher education.

The relationship between the Munda and the Muslim majority's factional leaders is best described concretely. Between 1991 and 1996, factional members and other supporting villagers were often dependent on the leaders for matters which required certain connections and procedural knowledge. However, the Adibashi had little knowledge of landownership laws, or the court proceedings related to land litigation. In cases such as these, this marginalised group was very much dependent on their local factional leaders to assist with sorting out these problems.

Factional leaders maintained 'good links' with the Union Parishad chairman and ward members as a means to secure access to state resources. The Munda understood this relationship, and, as the factional leaders made decisions concerning the distribution of resources, the Munda tried to gain

access to resources by establishing a rapport with them. Between 1991 and 1996, the period during which my data on distribution were collected, I observed that the Munda, or other Adibashi, were given preference in some wards, even though the ward's population was dominated by the Muslim majority. In these cases, it appears that the Munda received preferential treatment because of the importance of their vote in local elections.

The above scenario was common in villages during the mid 1990s. One such incident involves the abuse of a Munda girl by a Muslim landlord's son. Upon his death, Nazrul Islam left his four sons 300 bighas of land. One of his four sons, the youngest Shafiquel, regularly visited the Munda settlement of Khaspara. There, he had a romantic relationship with a Munda girl. The villagers knew of the relationship and warned Shafiquel several times not to be involved with the girl. One day, Shafiquel and the Munda girl were caught red handed by some members of the Munda community. The boy was severely beaten by the Munda and bound up with ropes. The Munda demanded Tk.30,000 (USD 744.79) for the boy's release which the Islam family paid to the girl's family.³⁾ But the matter did not end there. The Islam family filed charges of robbery against 33 Munda who participated in these events. The Munda filed a counter claim against the boy, a claim for which they received the backing from local factional leaders. Because the Islam family had links to high-ranking government officials, Munda needed the support of the local factional leaders to even bring their case. Thus during the early 1990s (1991-1995), the Munda depended on their patrons and factional leaders for assistance on such a variety of issues. Munda were not directly connected to the local government; rather, they looked to factional leaders for assistance in their communications with these offices.

By the mid-1990s, each Munda village had its own political unit operated by their village *pradhāna* (headman of the village). The *pradhāna* is elected by peoples consent and his responsibilities are to settle disputes and arrange marriages. The *bicār* (village meeting) was operated along traditional lines (dealing with marriage disputes, allegation of verbal abuse and theft), but some matters were taken to union or Upazila level officials. Dispute resolution systems evolved in interesting ways in Munda villages. Minor disputes such as intra-household conflicts, supra-legal arguments over land, or neighbourly quarrels were resolved by the village *pradhāna* locally. For disputes over land and those requiring survey or arguments over livestock and other assets between households, the Union Parishad was likely to be involved; the local *pradhāna* and his associates may participate in this case as witnesses to the decision making process. This type of proceeding could be initiated

3) In 1995 1 USD was equivalent to Tk.40.28.

by filing a complaint against someone directly with the Union Parishad chairman. Further, for issues that affect the whole community, such as declining law and order, land disputes between Bengalis and Munda, or problem with young people and alcohol, disputes were forwarded to the Upazila level.

If there was any *sālīśa* (complaint) in the *bicār*, local influential Muslims acted as patrons to help them to resolve conflicts. Their dependence on this patron group was significant; in return for the 'shelter' of the patron, the Munda provided them with political support and labour in the field whenever it was requested.

In sum, the political shift that occurred in the early-to-mid 1990s did not provide the Munda with much opportunity to gain an 'equal' share of state resources. There was sustained exclusion of most of the Munda from effective forms of political action and expression. Munda dependency on Muslim patrons was clear. Factional leaders dominated the decision making process for resource distribution, and established political networks for their personal gain that prevented Munda from participating in the democratic process and gaining direct access to state resources.

4.2 Rise of Awareness (mid 1990s-2000): NGO and New Political Vocabularies

Munda dependency on Muslim patrons gradually weakened after mid 1990s. The installation of DTWs in 1992 tripled crop production and resulted in year-long working opportunities in the agrarian sector; this, in turn, improved the bargaining position of wage-labouring Munda. At the same time, NGOs actively sought to increase public awareness of Munda causes, educate the Munda on the various government programs established to support the poor, and provide a public platform for the Munda to demand more state subsidies.

During the late 1990s, the Munda began to organise themselves and, with the assistance of NGOs, began to demand various government subsidies. At the same time, leftist grassroots organisations, active in this area since the 1960s, challenged traditional local landowning interests. One local NGO, called 'Ashrai,' tried to organise Adibashi of this region on the basis of this long history of the leftist party's pro-poor activism. As a result, Munda and other Adibashi formed village-based associations that bargained with Muslim patrons to standardise working hours. Traditionally, Munda workers went to the fields early in the morning and finished work according to landowner's wish. Other than the peak agricultural season they began with a new schedule for work. They started working at 7 or 8 am and stopped at 3 to 4 pm. By negotiating with their Muslim patrons, the Munda made the first steps toward breaking 'a consistent traditional custom,' and overcoming the arbitrary attitudes and dominance of Muslim landowners.

The Munda population also started participating in rallies organised by different NGOs indicat-

ing their growing visibility in local political culture. By participating in NGO activities to promote awareness and empowerment, the Munda better understood the language of 'rights' and 'justice,' a language that they began to use in order to assert their right to a 'due' allocation of government redistribution funds. Since the mid 1990s, the government has introduced a number of cash pension schemes targeting the poor. Previously, factional leaders used their power to select beneficiaries from among his family for his own political gain. The Munda and other Adibashi, with assistance from NGOs, visited Union Parishad and appealed for their 'due' share. The significance of such moves indicates increased awareness and the sense that Munda became more mobile in connection to local governments. They became more active, participated in programs relating to their 'economic mobility' sponsored by both NGOs and the government. Though this attempt was not entirely successful in shifting the political pendulum in their direction, the steps brought the issue of political 'equality' to the forefront and laid the foundation for the Munda to get their rightful share of support from government.

In 1996, the state held an election and the AL came into power. This new government continued the developmental plans already in place. However, the AL government gave preference to the Adibashi population as they, with a voting majority of 45% in this Upazila, were a veritable 'vote bank' for the party. Munda support of the AL is historic, dating back to 1949. As the oldest political party, the AL enjoys widespread grassroots support, particularly for its leadership role in the war of independence in 1971. While in control, the AL government introduced new projects targeted exclusively at the Adibashi community in the Barind region, including a loan scheme for livestock rearing and educational scholarships for Adibashi students.

In 1997, a committee consisting of representatives from the Munda and other Adibashi groups was formed in order to distribute loan funds among the Adibashi community. The responsibility of the committee was to make a list of deserving Adibashi recipients and to distribute government loans to these Adibashi in order to improve their livelihood. Some Munda, Santal and Oraon were able to take the loans and expand their income through livestock farming. Similarly, the government allocated funds to support Adibashi students. A school committee took responsibility of selecting Adibashi students for educational scholarships. However well-conceived these programs were, it appears that Munda and other Adibashi were largely unable to take advantage of the loan schemes and educational scholarships introduced in 1997; when I interviewed Munda students and their parents, I learned that, at that time, only a few families knew about these loans and scholarships. While these types of programs increased the opportunity for Munda to participate in government programs in general, the lion's share of benefits still went to those individuals who were able to establish good

links with the local level government, i.e., the Union Parishad chairman, ward members and government officials.

Certain well-connected individuals within the Munda community acted like the factional leaders in order to forge allegiances with high-level leaders like the Member of Parliament, Upazila or Union Parishad chairman, ward members, government officials and political leaders of the aligned party. This allegiance between Munda factional leaders and important officials was intended to ensure a certain level of financial support from the government necessary to stabilise the Munda community's social, political and economic life. The effects of this type of arrangement varied; for this study, however, we focused attention on the political circumstances of the Munda in Rasulpur.

4.3 Rise of Munda Leaders and Their Relation to Factional Politics (2001-2006)

Factional politics in Rasulpur intensified during the period of 2001-2006 as local power centres were divided between two political parties. These power centres, like Members of Parliament (MP) and the Union Parishad (UP) chairman, were actively involved in the allocation of government resources to the general public, including to the Munda community. When both of these centres were controlled by the same political party, there was no question of factions among the people; however, in 2001, when the MP was a member of the BNP and the UP Chairman the AL, factions developed in the Rasulpur union. While this power spilt played a role in these factions, it was, in fact, the Muslim leadership who sought to power-grab and secure additional funding for their constituents.

In this factional situation, some Munda leaders began to ignore common, community interests; by aligning themselves with the leaders of the ruling party, they sought government allocations and special coverage for their own gain. It is also true that factional politics is the way to adapt to the new opportunities for political participation under democracy. In the past two decades, three Munda families, one each in Khaspara, Mahapara and Jinarpur, emerged as significant players in village politics.⁴⁾ Let us see one example where members of the Munda community used factions for gaining special government support.

4) These families 'modernised' their living habits, leading the life of wealthy cultivators: the men wore western 'pants & shirts' while supervising their labourers, whereas the women remained in the home. The families gave up drinking alcohol, changed their surnames and their children started attending school. The members of these families also retained some traditional practices; family members assembled at night for readings from the epic and the idol of *Sharashati* (Hindu Goddess of knowledge) took residence inside the Khaspara family's home. These families acquired land through money lending (though this was only rumoured in the case of Khaspara family) but also by hard work, thrifty living and judicious investment in land.

Jogen Chandra Sarkar holds a BA degree and worked with NGOs before returning home to care for his family's land and investments. He is an ambitious land owner and would-be a local leader who sees himself as a proper, good community leader.⁵⁾ In an interview, he expressed his desire to support his community on many occasions, citing a recent incident in which he donated fish, at significant personal cost, for his Munda neighbour's wedding ceremony. Jogen claims to favour the Munda labourers point of view during wage bargaining and that he would like to participate as a candidate in the Union Parishad chairman election. However, he feels that he needs to earn more confidence before he runs for office. From his own experience, Jogen knows that his community is not necessarily in agreement with his ideas; for instance, Jogen wanted to organise a cooperative society in the village, but his fellow community members did not respond well. To best represent them, Jogen feels he should establish positive relationships both within his own Munda community and with Munda outside of Khaspara.

When he was asked about his feelings regarding his community, he blamed their low status on their actions: drinking alcohol, failing to pursue education, remaining indifferent regarding their own development and welfare, and not taking initiative to secure benefits. In sum, sadly, he believes that, "We [Munda] made ourselves low."

Jogen and his brothers now own some 129 bighas of land, eight ponds, a doctor's chamber and a pharmacy at the local bazaar. They have a very good relationship with all local influential leaders and are members of one of the major political parties, the AL. Jogen's family used to play an important role in the election of local and national bodies, arranging meetings of their community to support their chosen candidate and ensuring the highest possible percentage of votes in their favour.

In return for their loyalty, this family enjoys all the benefits of government facilities, like agricultural credit and a government-funded road leading directly to their house. The symbiotic relationship between the local government leaders and the Munda elite (like Jogen) was mutually beneficial; the local authorities insured their authority and position, and the Munda enjoyed the backing of local leaders. For Jogen, this means that, in order to retain the support

5) Jogen Chandra Sarkar, the youngest son from Khaspara family, was given many resources as a child. His father was a doctor and very popular among the Adibashi and the Bengali majority Muslims and Hindus in his village. His father was keen to give education to his children and as he owned some property, he could afford to do so. Jogen's father always encouraged his children to be better human beings and Jogen and all his brothers are now well-educated and live better lives. This family has followed a somewhat different model than is typical for Munda families, one that emphasised modern education and used the marriage ladder to climb up the Hindu caste system, thereby widening the family's social network. The children of this family also have carried on this tradition, studying in school and continuing on to colleges and universities.

of the local leaders, he must ensure electoral support of the Munda. In many respects, Jogen and his family's effort allowed them to gain social status and economic security by utilising the political opportunities that came their way. For example, in 2002, there was a conflict between the Jogen family and their wealthy, Muslim neighbours (a family that owned nearly 50 acres of cultivable land). The conflict between these families arose when the Muslim family tried to grab the land using false documents around Jogen's family's property. Though Jogen's family had legal documents for the land, their Muslim neighbours used their political connections to attempt to illegally take some of this property by bribing local officials. Jogen, using his own political connection and network managed to stop this illegal activity and save his family's land from the neighbours' schemes. It was only possible for Jogen and his family to stop this illegal activity because of their wealth and political affiliations with local influential leaders; other Munda families, without these exceptional connections, would not have fared so well.

This scenario, though, reveals an even more complicated division of ethnic politics. The type of influence that people like Jogen's family enjoys has, in turn, caused the marginalisation of other, less well-connected members of the Munda community. This disparity has thus created a division between 'elite' and 'ordinary' Munda causing only some 'elites' to benefit from 'democratisation' during this period (2001-2006). While collecting information on this period, I learned that ordinary Munda in Barind often find it impossible to obtain police protection or assistance following a theft or attack. Because of a perceived bias, Munda seek assistance from the Upazila chairman for any case that involves a Munda and a Muslim; only in the worst-case scenario will they seek help from the local police force. The police frequently denied the Munda access to justice, bowing, instead, to pressure from rich and powerful Muslims. This process may be illustrated with an example of a conflict between a rich Muslim landowner and a sharecropper Munda that occurred in 2002 in my study area.

Noresh Munda is a sharecropper who lives in a two-storey mud house; he owns one acre of agricultural land. In the summer of 2002, a rich Muslim landowner, Enamul, agreed to lend Noresh Tk. 10,000 for his daughter's wedding. Enamul, taking advantage of Noresh's inability to read, made Noresh 'sign' (through a thumb print) a document which claimed that he had borrowed Tk. 15,000 and given his land as security. When Noresh was unable to pay the interest on this fictitious sum, Enamul seized his land. Noresh subsequently confronted Enamul about the trick; his confrontation was returned with violence. Enamul, with the help of local goons,

seriously injured Noresh and had him thrown in jail.

A well-connected man, Enamul could manipulate both Noresh and the police. He combined his attempt to keep the local police force on his side with an effort to establish contact with local politician. Enamul established a relationship with a local politician through his brother's son-in law's uncle who maintained close relations with a local MP from BNP. Noresh got out of jail with the help of Jogen and by bribing a local official. However, the case against Noresh was not dismissed. Upon the advice of his community, Noresh consulted with a local, Muslim factional leader, Rana. Rana, with Noresh, approached the local police in order to lodge a complaint against Enamul. However, even with Rana's help, the police officer reacted coldly to their request, indicating that Noresh would have to pay a large bribe in order to convict a man of Enamul's wealth and standing. With the cards stacked against him, Noresh's family declined to file a case against Enamul, and Noresh spent one year in jail.

Noresh's case illustrates the problems that ordinary Munda face; without political networks Munda struggle to access rights, justice and protection against influential Muslims. Despite the outcome, this incident is significant in that, even knowing that he would not get the support of the police, Noresh went to police station to file a case against the powerful Muslim. In this way, Noresh took a stand against the corrupt government and their oppressive practices.

Thus so far, we have discussed the transformation of the political culture in Rasulpur. We found that the local political sphere underwent an important change during the early 2000s. It gradually evolved away from the patron-clientelism that defined it in the early and mid 1990s. In the early 1990s, the Munda underwent a process of electoral democratisation, and became an important source of votes for Muslim party leaders. However, as a minority, they always remained at the mercy of the majority. The Munda could access a certain measure of state resources through their patron-client relationship with Muslims; however, when it comes to the issue of rights and the administration of justice, the Munda were not treated as equals of the Muslim majority. From 1996 to 2000, the AL government gave opportunities to a few select Munda in the administration of state development programs; this resulted in a division between 'elite' and 'ordinary' Munda. Only some 'elite' Munda benefited from 'democratisation' and only very few gained significant access to government resources and programs. Most Munda continued to be marginal to the political process, exploited as a 'vote bank' by the powerful Muslim leaders. The most important change during this period was the activity and influence of NGOs in the area, raising awareness of the political struggles of the poor and of the Adibashi in general. The Munda became more active in rallies organised

by NGOs demanding equal distribution of government resources and participation in government programs for the poor. Although the NGOs' activities did not improve the political position of many 'ordinary' Munda, they were effective in providing new political vocabulary for demanding 'equality,' 'rights' and 'due share.'

5. Munda Participation in the Process of Political Transformation (2007-2010)

5.1 Interim Government and Legal Institutional Support for Minority's Rights (2007-2009)

The interim Bangladeshi government is a Non-party Caretaker Government (NCG), that assumed the responsibility of administering the country during the dissolution of the old parliament and the commencement of new one [Ahmed 2004]. The main function of this caretaker government was to make the necessary arrangements for an impartial nationwide election. The NCG government, initially formed for a tenure of 90 days in 2008 lasted, instead, for two years; it would only be disbanded after a new parliament commenced its first session and a Prime Minister was in office. During its term, the NCG undertook several development plans; one of the primary goals of this government was to erase political corruption at both the state and local levels. The NCG revised some government plans such as land reclamation policy for the Adibashi people and the government owned (*khāsa*) pond settlements (*khāsa pukur bandobasto*). The land reclamation policy (or land transfer right for Adibashi) aimed to solve the historic problem of land grabbing, a practice that began with the British government who enacted a law to protect Adibashi land. The chief protection of Adibashi land was provided by the 'Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908.' As per the State Requisition Tenant Act of 1908, the transfer of lands to non-Adibashi people without the prior permission from the District Commissioner is prohibited. This law was revised in 1989 and has been often violated, especially in the transferral of Adibashi land to the (historically) new Muslim majority. In the view of elderly Munda, "All these Muslim landlords were *phakira* (beggars) in the past; they gained all this land by cheating Hindus and Adibashi." Nishikant Munda said to me on one occasion that, "Now we are in great economic difficulty. Our lands were cheated away by the Muslims here. In Tahsil office (Land Revenue Office) and Record room of Naogaon you will find in the CS & SA records that the owner of the lands were the Hindus and Adibashi. All of a sudden in the RS record the Muslims (Salimuddin / Kalimuddin) appeared as the owner of the lands." He added, "The Adibashi are simple, ignorant, fools and can easily be cheated. Even counting Tk 10,000 is difficult for the people in my community. The Muslim bribed the *Muhuri* and made him write 1 acre (3 bigha) instead of 1 bigha. This was the way of becoming *Choudhury* (this title is used to describe Muslims who own large amounts of land). Previously, they had no land. I am not telling

you a lie. You can go and check.”

There are hundreds of land reclamation documents filed in the local Land Revenue Office. In the past, it was difficult for Munda to get important documents from the revenue office without paying a bribe. In 2007, the NCG, in order to protect the interests of the Adibashi people, instructed that all land transfers be carried out legally and that the law protecting Adibashi land should be strictly enforced. Four Munda families who were cheated in the transfer of their land to Muslim, applied to the government for reclamation. During my fieldwork, one family was successful in reclaiming their land from a powerful Muslim family who had illegally taken the land 15 years prior. Furthermore, news from Union Parishad confirms that a few Santal and Oraon families were also able to reclaim their property after 10-15 years. This time, the Adibashi and the Munda got government-backed, legal support for the reclamation of their land.

The Khas pond settlement (*khāsa pukur bandobasto*) was a governmental scheme intended to promote fish cultivation. The government gave leases to this *Khas* (government owned) pond in order to promote its policy of supplying the domestic market with sufficient fish. The leasing laws are specific to the size of the pond. Those ponds that are less than three acres cannot be leased or used by any specific person. These ponds are to be used for bathing, washing, and fishing or irrigation purposes by adjacent villagers, as is the customary right [Land Management Manual, 1991]. The Union Parishad is responsible for the preservation, maintenance and taxation of these small ponds. Every year, the Union Parishad must deposit TK. 5.00/per acre to the taxation office. The Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) and the Assistant Commissioner of Land (AC Land) bear the responsibility of maintaining these ponds (less than three acres) and ensuring that they remain in the control of neighbouring village populations, not illegal land grabbers [Land Management Manual 1991].

As fish production is a lucrative business, ponds are seen as economic objects, and thus, the competition among leasers for good fishing ponds increases along with the market demand for fish. This commoditisation of the fish ponds led to conflicts between the customary user and the leaser. In Munda settlements, the *khāsa* ponds of less than three acres are typically located within their village settlements and were thus used for drinking water and bathing. The powerful Muslims, who lived in outside the village, used to possess the pond illegally. This practice was common because, until 2007, the law prohibiting it was not properly enforced. In 2007, the interim government revised this ‘Khas pond settlement’ (*khāsa pukur bandobasto*) to ensure the rights of village communities. These policies provided legal reinforcement for the Munda fight to retain, or regain, their rights to *Khas* ponds.

Upon learning of the government’s initiatives, the Munda took immediate action to get control

of the *khāsa pukur* adjacent to their villages. There were two *khāsa pukur* in Khaspara, and, during the interim government, local Munda immediately took control of one that measured less than three acres. One powerful Muslim with his musclemen came to take the control of the pond but they were stopped by the Munda. The Muslims had hoped to take control of the pond illegally because the customary right that had prevented it before had not been enforced by previous governments. During the interim government's administration, though, the law was strictly enforced, and the Munda immediately exercised their agency and reclaimed their 'due' right over *khāsa pukur*.

According to the *khāsa pukur bandobasto* initiative, the interim government announced a prioritisation of the Adibashi community in the distribution of leases for those ponds that were larger than three acres and located in Adibashi settlements. After this announcement, the Munda of Khaspara started to organise themselves by forming the requisite cooperative in order to take part in the initiative. The story of *khāsa pukur* in Khaspara is illustrative here.

Until 2007, a certain *khāsa pukur* located in Khaspara, larger than three acres, was leased by the government to village Muslims. Though the lease contract had expired, the Muslim lessee tried to take back the control of the *khāsa pukur* by brute force. Panchanon Munda, resident of Khaspara, with help from his family and fellow villagers, fought back and gained control over the *khāsa pukur*. These events transpired while the interim government was in control of Bangladesh. Because of the renewed sense of law and order that was a hallmark of this administration, the Munda believed that the government would protect them from the force of the local Muslim aggressors. So, they fought back against this Muslim villager's action to control the *khāsa pukur* illegally. The Panchanon Munda was aware that the new interim government had begun enforcing the prioritisation of Munda lessees for *khāsa pukur* leases. The Panchanon Munda took advantage of this opportunity and secured legal control over the *pukur*. When the time came for the resettlement of the *pukur*, the young Munda applied for the lease to the government official. A group of 20 Munda established the required cooperative and also applied for the lease of the adjacent *khāsa pukur* of the Khaspara. This time, they were aided by government officials, something that would have been quite rare in the past.

For the leasing of *khāsa pukur*, the government gave priority to those who live adjacent to the fishing pond. However, this was not, at least initially, put into practice by government officials. During the NCG period, however, this policy of prioritisation began to be applied more strictly. The above case shows that the legal framework for the pond settlement provided the Munda with institutional

support to take a stand against illegal actions of the Muslims and to start demanding their rightful share in the government's redistribution of resources.

It was during the interim government period, in 2008, when I first went to the study villages. When I asked about the political situation, the Munda lamented about how they had been victimised by the previous government; they criticised government officials for not properly implementing developmental programs. In addition to taking charge of elections, the NCG also instituted only one important initiative to eradicate corruption from the politics, a change that also affected local politics. As I have shown, the strong political influence wielded by the Muslim majority in the distribution of government resources was corrected in this period. In previous years, it was normal to find that a Munda had been robbed by Muslims as they were coming back from bazaar after selling cattle. The Munda had to bribe local powerful Muslims and the police in order to sell their cattle at the bazaar. During the brief tenure of the interim government, such robbery was also halted. The Munda were feeling happy as the NCG government took such initiatives and checked the undue practices of local *mastāna* (goons) backed by factional leaders and politicians during these periods.

The most noticeable change during 2007-2009 was the government's support of the Munda against the illegal Muslim pond grabbers who threatened to take away the Munda's customary right to these ponds. The Munda also started demanding their due share on leasing *khāsa pukur* in accordance with the law. Thus, the introduction of a legal framework and institutional support, and the government's efforts to clean up corruption, led the Munda to demand their 'due' right and 'fair' share.

5.2 Electoral Process and New Political Government (2009-2010)

The interim government held an election in January 2009, one that was promoted as being 'free of corruption.' Given this new political environment, the Munda became enthusiastically involved in politics. I saw Munda going to listen to meetings and participating in rallies. In this section, I will present some data on the 2009 election and the political behaviour of the Munda community in this election.

My research showed that the Munda had easy access to the local Union Parishad members, and for any kind of communal issue for which they needed assistance, they consulted with the Union Parishad chairman. Local leaders, party activists, local Union Parishad members and the Union Parishad chairman were the primary political contacts for the Munda. These 'politicians,' in Bangladeshi society, are the link between the government and the people. The political participation among the Munda is high. Most of them actively participate in election campaigns, are interested in politics and love to talk about it. They actively take part in election campaigns, attend rallies, canvas

from door to door, and distribute leaflets.

The material on Munda political behaviour mirrors the emergence of a culture of political participation. The majority of Munda claimed that villagers are affiliated with the AL. The reason why the majority of the Munda are loyal to the AL requires some analysis. To explain Adibashi affiliation with AL, political worker Ranjit Kumar Munda looked back to 1971; he explained that, "During the liberation war in 1971 the Pakistani Army started atrocity on the Bengalis, especially on Hindus. Many Munda and other Adibashi fled to the neighbouring country for shelter as refugee. Even after the end of liberation war, Indian Government bid farewell to Adibashi with oil, soap, vermilion, new clothes as a gesture of friendship. These all good will gestures of India were possible as Sheikh Mujib (then leader of AL) was having good relationship with India and supported people of the then East Pakistan during dire crisis. This historical basis gives the Adibashi more confidence on AL." Ranjit Kumar Munda's view is echoed not only among educated and devoted political workers, but also among other elderly Munda in the area.

The elderly Munda observe that there is, in the current political climate, a rising division between the young Mundas and factional politics. In a conversation with a few Munda activists, they expressed their concern that the Munda would be able to gain positions in the power structure now that they have enough votes from their both their own community and other Adibashi groups. Citing the 1984 elections in which a Munda was elected as an Upazila Chairman, these activists note that the Munda have more eligible candidates, too. The Munda are striving to secure the proper political connections for their people and create a scenario in which, one day, they can freely exercise their voting rights and elect the candidate of their choice. The Muslim political leaders, however, undermine Munda and other Adibashi possibilities of acquiring posts in the local government. In an interview with me, these Muslim leaders questioned the ability of the Munda to lead, characterising them 'submissive' and 'lacking in courage.'

No doubt the Munda face the challenge of overcoming the existing power structure of the Bengali majority. Munda leaders are aware that, because the Bengali majority will not vote for them, a Munda would not be elected in a formal representative position. In addition, the Munda need to earn the confidence of the leaders of the Bengali majority. The current position of the Munda political leadership is to participate in political activities that will establish positive recognition from the related interest groups (party politician/local political leaders) to be complementary to each other. In this way, the Munda hope to establish a reciprocal relationship with the major political parties; if they help the parties, the Munda want to see assistance from the party once elected.

On the other hand, for ordinary Munda, power is a 'game of money.' The saying, "Politics is

the ethic of kings, we are simple man (*sādhārana loka*), we could not do such kind of politics (*rājnīti*). Participation in politics requires lot of financial abilities and connections. Our participation in politics is actually very much related to our existence in this soil.” Clearly, the prevailing opinion is that money plays a significant role in politics, and given the political climate, this is reflected in how the Munda perceive current political culture.

In 2009, a new government, dominated by the AL, was elected; the democratisation process continued after this election. I interviewed the Munda in order to evaluate the political situation after the AL took power in the National Legislative Assembly Election of Bangladesh. The Munda I talked to seem to be feeling at ease, especially because they were affiliated with the winning political party. Their representation in local political institutions and at higher levels is now a remote possibility, even as the Muslim community resists such a move. I asked a Munda labourer, “What expectations do you have with the newly elected government?” He answered, “The leaders of AL are more people oriented and sympathetic towards us. The workers of the other political party are ill-tempered, communal and revengeful. If they (political leaders of other party) get chance, they will engage in looting; and apply force to violate the beautiful girls of Adibashi. In such a situation, we are so helpless that the UP Chairman or Police Officer does not pay attention to take a stand beside the victim of our community. While the Awami League workers and leaders try to pay attention to the victim at least with a verbal consolation.”

In the 2009 national election, an MP elected in the Niamatpur constituency was both a member of a Hindu minority group and well-known by the Munda as a political leader. During the run-up to the election, the AL put a lot of importance on the Adibashi as a voting block. In order to protect these votes, the AL kept the Adibashi organised by recruiting their workers and allowing representation at various levels in its committees. After the election, as per MPs instruction the local government also involved the Munda in different committees, e.g. the bazaar committee, school committee, and law and enforcement committee. Though their involvement in different committees at Union Parishad level did not mean that they had gained access to the decision-making process, their inclusion and involvement in these committees can be seen as part of a government initiative to broaden the political base of its local government bodies. As a means to improve the decision-making process at the local level, the newly-elected government is trying to make this process more accountable to the people; something that I feel is a clear improvement over past administrations.

The connection between the Munda and the Union Parishad chairman, as well as with Adibashi ward members, bolstered both their confidence in the political system and opened up opportunities for them to influence local government officials. In my study area, the atmosphere of political sup-

port for the Adibashi has prevailed; the Munda have the local support they need to overcome undue oppression by the Muslim majority, preventing such injustices as attacks by Muslim *mastāna* and the molestation of Munda women.

Unlike even two years ago, the Munda are now also filing legal cases with the Union Parishad chairman's office. I found several complaints where Munda filed cases against Muslim for robbery and cheating. Now, these Munda are now getting legal support from the government in the pursuit of their claims. The Muslims see this assertion of legal standing as an attack on their dominance and a way to "dig their (Munda) own grave." In the Muslim view, the empowerment of the Munda population will only lead to conflict between the Muslims and the Munda. Thus, the Muslim community has reacted with acts of violence and arson against those Munda who file court cases against Muslims. These assaults on the Munda claimants are intended to bankrupt them, making it impossible for them to pay the court fees and bribes required to advance their cases. Despite the risks, these cases are one way that the Munda can assert their rights; contemporary Munda are now aware of their rights and are willing to fight for them.

Party politicians admit that, when they go to the Munda to seek their vote, the Munda respond not only with questions about political promises but also with criticism for not having fulfilled earlier promises. One such party politician commented, "Now it is not so easy to convince them." This situation demonstrates that the Munda are not only aware of their own political situation, but also the effect that they have on contemporary politics.

In my conversations with them, Munda expressed defined views on certain policies of the new government. Though not a large community in terms of numbers nor particularly politically powerful, the Munda are slowly gaining the ability to organise in support of their issues. For example, the Munda I spoke with often expressed resentment for not receiving their government allocation of fertilizer for their crops. They complained that the allocation of resources is still determined at the local level and is thus victim to the political criterion set by the local Muslim majority party members. In addition, according to the records kept at the Upazila Nirbahi office, in 2008-2009, Tk. 100,000 was allocated to Adibashi children for scholarships. The Munda, however, complained that these scholarship monies arrived late, were of a reduced amount than promised, or did not arrive at all. Such criticism by the Munda indicates a new norm in which they actively desire a more 'fair' political culture where 'everyone should get their due right.'

The period between 2009 and 2010 can be seen as the continuation of the democratisation process that began in 2007. The reform policies begun in 2007 targeting the protection of minority rights in the allocation of natural resources and 'fair' entitlement to local government subsidies

provided a platform for the Munda to assert their legal rights. What is significant is that there is no longer a local, Muslim monopoly in control of these resources. The Munda and other Adibashi were previously excluded from the political process; now, more and more Munda are participating in the process of resource distribution, signalling a significant change in local political culture. As a result, there is growing political consciousness among the Munda. They now openly voice complaints about the discrepancy of prescribed norms and the reality of the political process. Their complaints and frustrations lead the government to make institutional changes in favour of the Adibashi population.

6. Conclusion

In previous studies on Adibashi people of Barind region, researchers have tended to concentrate on 'hegemonic structure' and analyzed the society through dominant/resistance framework. However, it goes without saying that Barind society has continuously been undergoing significant transformation. In contrast, this work tries to show the socio-political transformation of the Mundas in Bangladesh by looking at how changes in technology and institution provided new contexts for Mundas as a minority and marginalized people to assert their 'due' right and 'fair' share. This paper describes how the democratisation process, in terms of 'economic equality' in the distribution of state resources and subsidies among the poorest people, shaped local politics and the everyday lives of Munda in the villages. Analysing the changing circumstances of political atmosphere surrounding Munda, I argue that, in the present socio-political situation, it is no longer possible for the powerful Muslims and faction leaders to capture the external resources flowing into the village for use in pursuit of their own interests or to establish patronage networks and dominance over Munda for personal gain. Political spheres that were dominated by Muslim landowners and faction leaders through their control of land and tenancy relationships are declining day by day.

In this paper, I have tried to show how the democratisation process has affected both the local political process and everyday lives of the Munda people living in north-western Bangladeshi villages. The growth of agriculture after the introduction of deep-tube wells in early 1990s enabled Munda communities to renegotiate their relationship with politically and socially dominant local Muslim landowners. At the same time, state policies and various developmental programs designed to allocate state subsidies fairly to the poor and minorities provide the context to Munda to start demand their 'due' share. Although the process of democratisation from 1991 to 2006 was characterised by limited control by a select group of Muslim landowners, factional leaders and politicians, in addition to a small group of 'elite' Munda, this pattern has slowly changed and become more focused on the

rights of minority populations. Furthermore, a significant change to local politics took place in 2007 when the interim, NCG government began to provide both the legal framework and institutional support for minorities and the poor to access state resources. These attempts increased opportunities for the Munda to establish their customary right to the *khāsa pukur* (those, at least, that are less than three acres and had before been under the control of powerful Muslims) and to reclaim their land. They also started demanding their 'due' rights and 'fair' share in securing leases of larger *khāsa pukur* in their villages. The move to reduce corruption in the government sector from state level also created an atmosphere in which the Munda could openly protest discrepancies and illegal actions, while also participating in government developmental programs. Moreover, the use of terms such as 'injustice,' 'justice,' 'due,' 'fair' by the Munda is significant. The Munda now use political vocabulary informed by their experiences of injustice and, with the encouragement of NGO programs in the mid 1990s, they have begun to build their awareness and political participation.

Local governments extended their support to the Munda and included them on various committees. Because of this, the Munda are becoming more and more politically conscious. Munda involvement in certain committees at the local level does not mean that they are getting equal status, but their presence on these committees ensures their growing importance in local politics. Access to MP and UP chairman further gives the Munda contact with the political authorities who are able to hear their complaints advocate for their community's needs. Munda now openly criticise the disproportionate allocation of government resources to the Muslim majority who controlled the flow of cash locally; they also criticise the committees' inability to effectively implement government programs. As the Munda become more aware of their legal rights, they are increasingly concerned that they be allocated their equal share of government assistance and that a level of 'equality' is maintained. As a result, a new 'public culture' focused on creating a desirable political community, based on the concepts of 'right,' 'equality,' and 'fairness,' is emerging at the local level.

The historical process of democratisation in the Barind region demonstrates that equality in voting and representation alone cannot ensure the actual empowerment of the minority, although these are necessary steps in the process. Minority groups, such as the Munda, are in a politically disadvantageous position when majoritarian politics combine with a strictly hierarchical social structure. Legal and institutional frameworks are perhaps the only viable path for minority groups, like the Munda, to gain ground in the assertion of their rights and equitable access to government resources.

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